

PERSPECTIVES

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH AS A WAY OF LIFE: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

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Abstract

This is a personal account of events that occurred during 1989 related to the concept of participatory action research. Drawing upon my own experiences and education in the Canadian context, I introduce participatory action research as a way of life that is attracting more and more people in international adult education. I then examine two main issues in the debate surrounding the concept: the nature of knowledge and participation. This concept represents our current beacon for adult educator commitment to the elimination of oppression from the world.

Résumé

Cet article se présente comme un récit personnel des événements qui portèrent sur le concept de la recherche participative en 1989. Faisant appel à mes propres expériences et à mon éducation en contexte canadien, je présenterai la recherche participative comme une façon de vivre adoptée, internationalement, par un nombre croissant d'éducateurs des adultes. J'examinerai ensuite deux questions-clés portant sur le débat en cours: la nature des connaissances et celle de la participation. Ceci constitue un nouveau paramètre susceptible d'éclairer l'éducateur d'adultes dans la voie de son engagement pour un monde sans oppression.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a significant contribution to the adult education movement from the Third World. It reminds us as Canadians of adult education's commitment to social improvement and to our own innovative contributions to that end. The concept is

disarmingly simple with its appeal to basic democracy and mutual aid. It is challenging in its insistence that humankind must acquire the will and discipline to live in harmony with each other and with all other species.

Introduction

My experience in PAR related activities commenced in 1973 when I was part of a team of researchers working for the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians. As a trained historian whose responsibility it was to scour the public archives of Canada in Ottawa, I provided some of the historical knowledge that my legal and social science colleagues in Regina incorporated into their work on behalf of the Federation's treaty rights research. In addition, there was a team of field workers that helped people on reserves combine their knowledge of various treaty rights issues with the official knowledge we professional researchers manufactured. We in turn learned how to interpret our findings guided by the people for whom we worked. There was an action component as well. While tracing their history, Saskatchewan Indians were acting to transform their reality by setting right some past wrongs while resurrecting their dignity. I was deeply impressed by the process we had learned together and it influenced me throughout the five years I worked for the Federation, the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs and the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research. In between that work, I wrote a doctoral dissertation in adult education that searched out the community development concept in the Canadian and American adult education movement. Thus, I had the advantage of both reflecting upon and acting within a social change orientation.

I learned something else while working for the Federation. I discovered there is a much more exciting history of Canada than I had seen in the average textbook. Writing history on behalf of and with Native Peoples introduced me to a richness and a world view that I had not known. I also came to understand that we have created oppression in our country through policies based upon racism and sexism. Moreover, we wrote off an entire knowledge-generating system when we simply forced our value system upon our aboriginal ancestors. Hopefully that system has only been forced underground and not destroyed. Recalling the life-saving wisdom provided to the early European settlers of this continent by the Native Peoples, I wonder if we today are in need of some more?

We have strength in our adult education traditions that might also help. If PAR is related to people acting to solve problems themselves then we should recall the establishment of the Women's Institutes. We might recall the Antigonish Movement that very much depended upon humankind's natural abilities to cooperate collectively and marshal local resources for the well being of all.

Similarly, the farmer's movements in Western Canada as well as the rise of the Canadian Confederation of Farmers (CCF) and Social Credit political parties demonstrated our desire to participate actively in democracy. In these instances, people came together in face of economic depression, social instability and political impotence. We discovered reservoirs of energy and knowledge in communities when people came together for self-help and mutual aid. The community development concept was a guiding philosophy in the early years of our adult education movement: the idea that learning and action enabled people to become masters of their own destiny.

At the same time, some of these activities were contentious. Collective action to transform Canadian society was interpreted by some as too radical, if not revolutionary. Still, during the emergencies of depression and war during the 1930s and 1940s, all efforts were valid and all knowledge needed for our survival.

When the emergencies ended, when we became prosperous in a material sense, and when political extremism exemplified in McCarthyism made talk of social transformation suspect if not treasonous, inquiry about adult education helping to direct social change faded. Commencing in the 1950s, the trend was to professionalize, to legitimize the field of adult education study, and to create a discipline. Some ideas were forced into molds that changed their appearance and meaning. For example, adult education professors co-opted the mildly radical community development concept and declared it a method of adult education. (Pyrch, 1983, pp. 206-212) Community development programs that sprang up during the 1950s and 1960s aimed to ameliorate conditions for specific groups like the Native Peoples rather than looking to transform Canadian society; likewise there were similar programs that aimed to influence development in the Third World. Times had changed. The improvement of economic conditions but masked social and spiritual inadequacies. We might recall our colleague Ron Faris's story of our passionate forbearers but also note that his story about the reform

element in the Canadian Association for Adult Education ended in 1952. (Faris, 1975) Did our passion leave? Are we now entirely establishment oriented? Are we preoccupied with how to measure participation rates more and more finely? For what purpose? Does this work prepare us for the millenium? It seems to me that we must rediscover our passion if we hope to avoid redundancy. Or is it too late?

There are positive signs as well. The historian Michael Welton reminds us regularly of our obligation to work toward social transformation while introducing us to our radical traditions. (Welton, 1987) There are many and varied adult education activities that resemble PAR: for example, popular theatre, cooperatives, environmental groups, indigenous science, grey power. In other words, there are people who are investigating reality in order to change it. One difficulty is identifying and contacting those people. Perhaps the Participatory Research Group based in Toronto might help. It is hoping to identify PAR activities in Canada so that like-minded souls can find each other.

It seems to me that we might be able to recognize legitimate PAR if we acquire a good sense of what we are looking for. PAR is the methodology of an alternative, popular system of knowledge production. It is helpful to know that what we are doing is recovering knowledge as well as creating it. According to Rajesh Tandon, a vice president of the International Council for Adult Education, "...throughout history popular systems of knowledge and an alternative system of knowledge production have existed parallel to the dominant system". (Tandon, 1988, p.6) If this is so, we must look elsewhere in addition to the traditional institutions, agencies and programs. For my part, I am organizing a long term research strategy that is strongly influenced by what I know about PAR. I have in place a loosely conceived "Telling Our Story Ourselves Group" composed of individuals throughout Alberta that have accepted my invitation to explore the history of adult learning in the province. The plan is to encourage people to look outside schools and other formal structures to identify and analyze ways in which we have learned things in the past. Once encouraged to look beyond the barriers with which we have surrounded ourselves, an enormous reservoir of knowledge begs to be drawn forth, thus making our history of learning much more exciting than simply looking at schooling.

PAR Conferences

In July 1989, I was part of a team that managed an international conference on PAR at the University of Calgary, attended by people from 35 countries. Two months later, I attended a five day conference on PAR in Managua, Nicaragua that attracted practitioners and scholars from 25 countries. These conferences have been described and compared elsewhere. (Pyrch, 1990) Here, I shall share my selected impressions and observations.

Early in our discussions in Managua during a small group exercise, a Nicaraguan asked me why I was holding back my knowledge. We had introduced ourselves in the usual group discussion way. I sketched the Calgary story and was perceived to have a lot of information. My inclination was to observe and await appropriate moments to join in the conversation, and not appear to be the expert which I did not fancy I was. However, I was not permitted the luxury of just sitting back. My new friend said there was no time for anyone to hold back anything. Nicaragua was desperate and demanded immediate and complete support from all available resources. I found this refreshingly stimulating, coming from an environment where we hold back knowledge for our own advantage in order to score individual gain. Nicaragua's enormous needs demanded collective cooperative action. Egotism has no place. And so these observations are offered for scrutiny, hoping they will help us work together to understand the demands upon adult educators world-wide. Besides, knowledge is much more valuable when shared.

This sense of urgency is deepened when we look at the enormous threats to our survival in the form of the population explosion, the greenhouse effect and the AIDS epidemic. At the same time, the winds of change have turned into storms that are upsetting immovable objects like the Berlin Wall and Apartheid. A poet became president of Czechoslovakia in December 1989! Perhaps we are courageous enough to force down those barriers with which we have surrounded ourselves: academic disciplines; bureaucracies; nation states. PAR, it seems to me, is one way to do so.

PAR as a Way of Life

Many people I met at the Calgary and Managua conferences, and in meetings before and after, refer to PAR as a way of life. Orlando Fals

Borda, the president of the Latin America Council on Adult Education, told us about "science for life" that represents a new form of science which combines the various forms of knowledge as the promise for the future. He argued that scientific knowledge has its origins in people's knowledge and has forgotten its roots and its humanity. Our job is to reconnect science to its origins. He has been making this point consistently over the years and it highlighted his presentation to the Ljubljana conference on PAR held in 1980. (Fals Borda, 1981) Indeed, his life itself has been a model of the essence of PAR and he shared some of his story with us in Calgary. (Prych, Rusted & Morris, 1990) Even now as he has re-entered university life after a twenty year absence, he continues to be active in supporting democracy in Colombia. When I saw him in Managua he told me he was one of the organizers of *Colombia Unido*, a coalition of various social movements to champion the cause of peace and justice in his country: at some personal risk no doubt.

Fals Borda is not alone, and there probably are people in every country working in the same way and guided by similar ideas. I say this with confidence because I shared with many others in Calgary and Managua the powerful and immediate sense of "belonging to each other." We seemed to understand that we were there to learn how to learn from each other. We were directed by an ethic that encourages a balance between listening and speaking, and between taking and giving. We were searching for freedom, hoping we might help each other achieve it in the context of our own individual realities. We were helping each other gain confidence in who we were, finding our voice if you like.

Sometimes this helping occurred unexpectedly. During my visit to Esteli in northern Nicaragua, while sharing thoughts and experiences, I caught myself giving some advice to our hosts. They had shared their interpretation of how their community originated and evolved, and hoped some day a historian would tell their story for them. I spoke up and urged them to compile their story themselves because they were best able to do so. From the resulting nods and smiles from all, my point seemed to have hit home. The point is a simple one. Indigenous knowledge is profound and must not be undervalued.

While writing these words about our search for balance, I reminded myself again about how closely the activities resemble our libertarian roots. Michael Bakunin, a driving force in the anarchist movement in

Europe during the mid-nineteenth century, believed that if the revolutionary movement was to avoid turning into an end in itself, into another state even, complete unity must exist between its ends and means, between form and content. (Bookchin, 1977) We should live the ideas that we espouse. To me, this is implicit in PAR as a way of life. The discipline that this entails is reminiscent of an anarchist strain that has existed in Nicaragua. (Hodges, 1986) According to Murray Bookchin:

[Anarchism] originated in the age-old drive of the oppressed to assert the spirit of freedom, equality, and spontaneity over values and institutions based on authority. This accounts for the enormous antiquity of anarchistic visions, their irrepressibility and continual re-emergence in history, particularly in periods of social transition and revolution. (Bookchin, 1977, p. 27)

Perhaps the Sandinistas are the more recent libertarian visionaries. They displayed great individual and collective discipline to have survived American economic and political sanctions and will require even more discipline to survive the set-back in the election of February 1990. In the face of the extraordinary social transitions in several parts of the world at the moment, it may be that those visionaries might appear elsewhere as well.

If PAR is taken up as a way of life, there must be great demands on how one lives that life. Indeed, the more I find out about PAR the more challenging the prospect of doing it becomes. Is it in fact more rigorous than traditional research? As a process oriented search for justice and transformation, it is hard to describe because it is so dynamic. And yet what do educators ever know for certain? The historian Lawrence Cremin taught us that education is a complex process fraught with irony and contradiction.

What is taught is not always what is desired, and vice versa. What is taught is not always learned, and vice versa. And when what is taught is actually learned, it is frequently learned over lengthy periods of time and at the once, twice, and thrice removed, so that the intended and the incidental end up merging in such a way as to become virtually indistinguishable. Moreover, there are almost always unintended consequences in

education; indeed, they are often more significant than those that are intended. (Cremin, 1976, p. 44)

These uncertainties are comforting. The challenges of PAR seem manageable when we realize that even traditional education is faced with more questions than answers.

PAR Issues

There are many issues associated with PAR. I have identified some questions and have been with many people trying to find answers to them. These I propose to share in this section. At the outset, let us be clear that these have been issues for as long as we have searched for democracy and justice, and are not easily resolvable.

Knowledge. PAR advocates agree that official/expert/academic knowledge is insufficient to meet the difficulties we face world-wide. Fals Borda made this clear at Calgary when he said:

Up to now the science we have inherited, the Cartesian science, Kantian science, Newton's science has led us almost to destruction; people's knowledge more akin to life, closer to realities and to the real needs of people, may save us from destruction. (Pyrch, Rusted & Morris, 1990)

This "science for life," he concluded, is our great hope. His definition of science is much broader than the one with which most of us are familiar.

Quite simply, we seem to be working to democratize knowledge. Key questions might unlock many closed doors depending upon who asks what, when and where. What is science? What is knowledge? How is knowledge produced? Whose interests does knowledge serve? Whose knowledge is valuable? We are living at a time when new forms of knowledge are being recognized, some of which might be new but some of which is knowledge we have devalued and disqualified over time. For example, a group of Dene women from the Northwest Territories presented their traditional way of producing knowledge during the Calgary conference. They seemed to be growing in confidence in their ability to resurrect and share their knowledge, in this instance their traditional medicine. In addition, our aboriginal

guests from Australia shared similar knowledge. It seems that aboriginal scholars are becoming more confident in their understanding of their own science and are sharing it more often. (Colorado, 1988) These ways of knowing have been celebrated in other contexts as well. Belenky and her colleagues have demonstrated women's ways of knowing, concluding that "even the most ordinary human being is engaged in the construction of knowledge." (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 133)

Some commentators refer to a blending of people's knowledge with official knowledge; others refer to the prospect of creating an entirely new form of knowledge; and, others to envisaging parallel knowledge systems at work. During the Managua conference, four workshops, two English and two Spanish speaking, were directed to explore the nature of knowledge. One of the English speaking groups suggested there were two strands of thinking about the production of knowledge. (PAR Conference, Managua, 1989) One strand recognized two kinds of knowledge — scientific knowledge and popular knowledge. This strand "saw PAR as provoking the marriage of these two kinds of knowledge systems and coming up with new knowledge." The other strand looked at the mode of production of knowledge, recognizing two modes: the dominant mode that "supports the interests of the ruling class, elites and the state, to control and suppress the people and perpetuate the status quo;" and the popular mode that "produces knowledge to liberate and humanize and empower people." The group believed that the PAR process supports the popular mode while appropriating dominant knowledge for the benefit of the people. It was not decided which strand of thought was preferable.

Addressing the same issue, one Spanish speaking group concluded that "tying scientific knowledge to popular knowledge still does not achieve the systematized production of critical knowledge." They hinted that a "third knowledge" was required and was something more than simply blending the other two forms. Discussion centred around whether new knowledge was the goal or a new form of knowledge production, or both. This discussion has gone on since the early years of PAR.

During the Calgary conference, the Australians addressed the topic by drawing upon a new metaphor they related to a traditional metaphor in the culture of the Yolngu people of Arnhemland in the Northern Territory. This new metaphor is based upon ganma theory which

relates to that culture without appropriating the history of those peoples. Ganma was presented to us as describing a situation in which a river of water from the sea (western knowledge) and a river of water from the land (aboriginal knowledge) mutually engulf each other upon flowing into a common lagoon and becoming one. In coming together the streams of water mix across the interface of the two currents and foam is created at the surface so that the process of ganma is marked by lines of foam along the interface of the two currents. In terms of the metaphor then, their case study presentation is a part of the line of foam that marks the interface between the current of Yolngu life and the current of western life. Both Yolngu and westerners can benefit from theorizing over the interaction between the two streams of life.¹ (Watson & Chambers, 1989)

For me, the point is that the waters mix, dialogue with and learn from each other, and the result is a new form of knowledge enriched by both but unique. There is no hint of one consuming the other. They remain separate and sovereign, cooperative and sharing, generous and receptive: exactly as the Australian team presented themselves to us. This exemplifies the third kind of knowledge.

At present, I am most comfortable with the notion of PAR facilitating a process whereby parallel knowledge systems are at work moving humankind towards wisdom. This might capture what one of my colleagues on the Calgary organizing committee called "a wonderful synchronicity of ideas." (Kerr, 1990) It seems to me that if people's knowledge and official knowledge direct their efforts towards peace, justice and freedom, we might reach that dream by sharing energy while working together but apart.

One additional point about knowledge might be made, fully appreciating that these points are infinite. Much of the knowledge shared in PAR projects never makes it into the official or even the unofficial story simply because the projects themselves might be endangered. This seems to be understood by practitioners and there are things left unsaid that might represent the real power of the process. All countries have sanctions that are brought to bear if those

¹ The ganma metaphor is described in documents left with us in Calgary after the conference. Action Group
rrkala Community School, 1989. Interim Report on the project *Towards a Ganma Curriculum in Yolngu
hools*. Unpublished paper, p. 7.

working to transform society overstep certain hard to identify boundaries. These subtleties are difficult to express in this cold print medium but come out in all their glory when practitioners meet. "The important thing is to have met," a participant in Managua concluded.

During the experiences outlined thus far, it seems that most of the knowledge shared was resurrected knowledge and as resources dwindle globally we might come to rely on these processes more and more. As the economist Kenneth Boulding has observed:

Knowledge is clearly a capital stock of a population. Learning is the process by which additions are made to this stock and, of course, forgetting or negative learning represents subtractions from the stock, or deaths of knowledge. (Boulding, 1986, p. 80)

The challenge is to reach beyond our grasp and embrace the knowledge we have at hand but may not recognize.

Participation. What does it mean to get involved directly in democracy? Is it enough to vote once every few years? What is authentic participation? How much can one participate or should one participate? Are there dangers involved? How can one participate in a repressive system? These are some questions asked about participation. The answers are multitudinous and multifarious.

PAR demands the participation of the people in all aspects of the research process so that the researcher and the researched become one in the mutual emancipation of all. This implies many things. Those involved in the process must work together collectively and cooperatively, "always together", according to the Australian team during their Calgary presentation. (Marika, R., Ngurruwutthun, D. & White, L., 1989) Selfless discipline seems to be required while all decision-making is shared and open. Three lines written by Lao-tzu and borrowed by Bertrand Russell to introduce his study of libertarian thought, sum up for me the meaning of participation. (Russell, B., 1918, p. 3)

Production without possession
Action without self-assertion
Development without domination

This is very demanding indeed. It requires the discipline and commitment to work to break up the traditional oppressive relationships based on class, gender, race, religion or age, or any other discriminatory category.

Another major obligation in the concept of participation is the demand for action. "To understand participatory research you must do participatory research," Rachel Polistoco of The Philippines told the closing plenary in Calgary. (Polistoco, 1989) It was clear to everyone in Calgary and Managua that although it was good to have met and exchanged ideas, it was imperative that all return home to engage in PAR. This kind of commitment is reminiscent of the Highlander tradition of "getting information, going back and teaching it." (Adams, 1975) That was radical enough in the 1930s to have Highlander condemned by the authorities. Adding the requirement for us to act directly with the people carries the demand even further. We are led invariably into the realm of political activity. As Fals Borda noted in Calgary, we should be aware that what we do is political. "And don't get afraid by using the word political," he challenged. He referred to politics in the Aristotelian sense — "politics for justice, politics for progress, politics for peace." (Pyrch, Rusted & Morris, 1990)

PAR contains a political dimension and arouses controversy as a result. Some visitors to Calgary were unwilling to admit to political involvement. Others were certain about the political nature of their work and discounted as being PAR activities which were not political. This came out in Managua as well. Latin Americans were pretty clear about the political nature of their work and in the protection of Sandinista Nicaragua could talk openly. Participants from Africa were uncomfortable with such talk. They wondered if a revolution had to precede PAR since they could not see the process gaining a foothold on their continent if it implied political action. This directs us back to the questions posed at the beginning of this section. What is authentic participation? Clearly it varies according to time and place. Is it always identifiable, especially to outsiders? Or is it somehow masked in order not to attract attention from those it might challenge? On the other hand, if one is not engaged in social transformation work, in other words working to change society, is one doing PAR? Probably not, from my experience. It might be some other form of development work, but it is not PAR.

When we talked about democracy in Managua, the urgency, fear, passion and simplicity of the Guatemalans and Salvadorans was overwhelming and quite extraordinary compared to the routine sort of democracy that I practice. The sense of urgency might have been even greater amongst the Nicaraguans I met who have a sense of responsibility to translate the opportunity they have into a democracy that would be a model of justice, peace and equality. I detected that responsibility at the rural cooperative I visited as well as at the university. If that is indeed so, Nicaraguans might have been practising democracy more vigorously than we in our complacent democracy.

Obviously there are hazards, risks and sometimes penalties to participating in democracy. Representatives of the status quo usually feel threatened when people challenge the existing social order. All societies have sanctions to greet that challenge whether in the form of a bullet, loss of job, or refusal of tenure. There are other less obvious tensions. During the Managua conference, several Central Americans spoke of the psychological strains caused when familiar practices are abandoned and new ideas adopted. One of the English speaking workshop groups in Managua summarized their work with these words:

A challenge for PAR in Nicaragua and elsewhere is how a future free of past constraints can be envisioned. We must be aware of the psychological strain between past/present, dependency/independence and so on. (PAR Conference, Managua, 1989)

Is it any easier in Canada? We all know how easy it is to be stretched too far when always available to lend a helping hand. The queue outside an office suggests a willing helpful person behind the door. Few really appear to care so that those who do may become drained in no time.

These two issues, the nature of knowledge and participation, are hotly debated whenever PAR is discussed. There are many others. For example, is PAR really "research?" What sort? Can universities contribute anything to the war on oppression? Can one ever be neutral about anything? One of the English speaking groups at the final plenary session in Managua shared ten questions and statements

that summarized their concerns. These are listed here because they capture immediate and universal concerns:

1. How can we ensure that PAR is not another method of oppression?
2. How can we prevent the co-optation of PAR by the state?
3. What new relationships/institutions are needed?
4. The political nature of PAR needs addressing.
5. How can we strengthen the linkages between PAR and similar activities?
6. PAR is a political and social activity and not narrow.
7. How can we sustain PAR beyond projects?
8. How can we form an international network housed in the Third World?
9. How can we draw upon the strengths of expert knowledge?
10. How can we assure that PAR addresses women's reality?

There are fearful consequences if we do not participate in democracy. Within our own country we shall create more apathy, frustration and alienation if we are simply too lazy to get involved in our own communities. We must be vigilant and energetic in removing oppression from our own backyards. At the same time we must help others engaged in a similar task in our global village. "The point about democracy," stated a recent article in the Manchester Guardian, "is that it is an association of free peoples: and free peoples tend to care about other people struggling to be free." (Manchester Guardian Weekly, 1989, p. 1)

Conclusion

During the past several months PAR has become a major influence on my life. As a university-based professor of continuing education responsible for programs related to the environment, at every step I try to build in elements of PAR. For example, conferences I plan combine official with people's knowledge and I insist that advisors, presenters and participants cooperative collectively while encouraging each other to reflect on how we abuse the environment and then to formulate plans for doing something about it directly. This might not be authentic PAR but it aims at similar outcomes. My research interests as reflected in these words are clear. I am exploring establishing a PAR project in rural Alberta. I teach a graduate course on the history of adult education and make my biases clear. My students know my position and are free to share it or to critique it. At least they will have been exposed to one part of adult education, a part that unabashedly believes that our passion continues and we should simply get on with making the world a better place.

There is something, some ingredient in adult education from time immemorial that has been trying to expose and to nurture people's knowledge so that people and their communities can liberate themselves from oppression of whichever form: economic, spiritual poverty, ignorance, apathy, bigotry or political impotence. We need to recover that ingredient lest we are left behind while the storms of change spread world-wide. There is a fine line between what happened at Tiananmen and Wenceslas Squares. If faced with a similar challenge in Canada are we certain of the outcome?

As I end this part of my story, I leave to take up Polistico's advice to do PAR in order to understand it. It would be useful for me to hear about your experience with PAR. I need some help in making my connections. If these words start a dialogue with like-minded souls maybe our task will be easier. We need each other as we work for justice, progress and peace.

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